

THE BUSINESS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

by Bob Zeller, National Center for Civil War Photography

IT IS THE SINGULAR DISTINCTION of our most famous Civil War photographer, Mathew B. Brady, that he was at once credited for taking nearly every Civil War photograph and discredited for taking not a single one of them.

The truth fits neither stereotype. The myth that Brady was responsible for all Civil War photographs was fostered not so much by Brady's skillful self-promotion as by two illustrated biographies published in the 1950s.

The myth that Brady made no Civil War photographs is rooted in the notion that his eyesight was so poor, he could not see well enough to focus a camera. Brady, of course, did what one does with poor eyesight. He wore glasses.

On the other hand, it is true that Brady rarely operated the camera. He did not consider it his job. Think of Brady as a movie director, telling the cameramen what to shoot and even placing himself in the photo. His war images have a distinct style, particularly those he captured at Gettysburg.

The concept of Brady as a motion picture director is reasonable, because most Civil War photographs were stereographs that were meant to be seen in 3-D. When 19th-century Americans peered into a stereo viewer to see the latest images from the front, they saw the closest thing to a movie.

The stereoscopic viewer was America's primary form of mass-marketed home entertainment during the war. It survives today in the View Master. In the 1860s, the 3-D image was a marvel—and hugely popular. Each view cost 25 to 50 cents, about what a CD or video costs in today's dollars.

Brady and his counterparts were both historians documenting the war and entrepreneurs who sold an ever-expanding inventory of photographs and stereo views to satisfy public interest and demand.

Hand in hand with the stereo view came the card photograph, known as a "carte de visite," which is what we know today as the trading card. Stereo views and card photographs arrived on the American scene at about the same time. The mania for stereo photographs was in full bloom by 1859. By 1861, "cartomania" also had exploded. Each fit its own niche. The carte de visite was a photographic keepsake—a souvenir. The stereo view was a photographic viewing experience.

Both came into being with the advent of wet collodion photography, which used glass plate negatives and albumen photographic paper. Each negative could produce unlimited prints. Photographs could be easily copied and widely sold.



Mathew Brady's team assembles at Berlin (now Brunswick), Maryland, in October 1862. The staff, from left, included Silas Holmes, who became a successful New York City photographer; a cook named Stephen; E. T. Whitney; H. Hodges; a teamster named Jim; Brady; and David Woodbury.

In 1860, the new business of mass marketed photographs collided with history. Celebrities were spotlighted in a whole new way. A Brady carte de visite of Abraham Lincoln taken before his historic Cooper Union speech in New York on February 27, 1860, sold by the thousands. It enhanced his popularity and may have helped him win the presidency. A year later, enterprising Charleston photographer George S. Cook talked his way into Fort Sumter to photograph Maj. Robert Anderson, who was holding out in the Union garrison against the new Confederate States of America. Soon after, Anderson's card photograph was a bestseller in New York at 25 cents a copy.

Southern photographers took the war's first photographs, flocking to Fort Sumter within days of its surrender on April 13, 1861. Charleston photographers James M. Osborn and F. E. Durbec sold several dozen different views, including dramatic scenes of battle damage. They boasted of at least 20 stereo views of Fort Sumter alone, as well as "six large Photographs for framing."

In the North, Brady had galleries in New York and Washington. His Washington gallery was run by the Scottish immigrant Alexander Gardner, who achieved a photojournalistic milestone with his 3-D images of the dead on the Antietam battlefield in September 1862. Gardner stayed with Brady until late 1862 or early 1863, then opened his own gallery in Washington. Both men claimed credit for the idea to extensively photograph the war—and rightly so.

Brady was plagued by financial trouble during his career. This, probably more than anything else, led to Gardner's departure. (The argument that the split occurred because Brady did not properly credit his photographers is undercut by the fact that Gardner's name appears on many stereo views and folio prints he took while working with Brady.)

After the split, Gardner took with him the war negatives he made. In September 1863 he issued his own mail-order catalog, "Photographic Incidents of the War," with 572 images. Of these, 407 were in 3-D. He stated that any photograph could be "sent safely by mail to any address."

Brady did not produce his own line of war photographs after 1862, perhaps because of his money concern. His images were sold by the E. and H. T. Anthony Co.—the equivalent of today's Eastman Kodak Co. By war's end, the Anthony stereoscopic view catalog would feature more than 1,400 stereo photographs of the war. Hundreds would bear a small notation on the back: "Negative by Brady & Co."

In 1865, Gardner offered more than a thousand stereo war photographs for sale. By then he was using multiple cameras to document the history unfolding in the capital city. Gardner captured multiple images of such events as the hanging of the Lincoln assassination conspirators. Long before Edison invented movies, these sequential exposures created something just short of a crude motion picture, adding a final distinctive touch to the entrepreneurial enterprise of Civil War photographers.



"A slim build, a man, I should judge, about five feet seven inches tall, dark complexion, dark moustache ... was quick and nervous," an acquaintance recalled of Brady. New York soldiers gave Brady the sword visible beneath his linen duster when they found him wandering the Bull Run battlefield, unarmed and lost. "Brady the Photographer Returned from Bull Run," proclaims the picture caption at lower right, penned by an assistant.